

Out of the Concert Hall...

...and into the museum, armory, warehouse, stone mill, parking garage? Choral programs in unusual venues can ignite a spark of creativity for choruses

BY KELSEY MENEHAN

The Armory of the First Troop Philadelphia City Cavalry is a fortress-like stone structure, occupying almost an entire city block. Massive wooden doors swing wide to the street. An arched entryway leads into a massive space (see cover), where in the early part of the 1900s, soldiers on horses reported for duty. Today, tanks and humvees—the modern vehicles of war—sit parked at the ready.

It is not what one thinks of as a performance space. Yet on a sticky June afternoon, singers and dancers are processing in, singing fragments of Civil War love letters with military timing. It's the world premiere of *battle hymns*—a meditation on war by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Lang, performed by the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia and the Leah Stein Dance Company.

For the singers of the Mendelssohn Club, the performance is the culmination of a long and exhilarating season that has transported them far from the elegant concert halls and acoustically rich churches that are their accustomed venues. In September 2008, another dance/music collaboration, *Urban Echo: Circle Told*, with

Leah Stein and composer Pauline Oliveros, found them in Philadelphia's Rotunda, a domed octagonal structure built in 1911 as a house of worship, now owned by University of Pennsylvania. Singers danced and dancers sang and the "sounds were bouncing off of every nook and cranny," baritone Jon Kochavi recalled.

And now there's the Armory—a completely different kind of challenge—16,000 square feet of empty space, where sounds

waft up into soaring ceilings. The chorus must move while singing a difficult minimalist score. "We were creating the work in the space as we were rehearsing," Kochavi said. "It was very challenging."

For Alan Harler, 20-year director of the Mendelssohn Club, this was his idea of a dream season—two site-specific programs as bookends—but he admits that putting on programs in "unusual places" is not for the faint of heart or the risk averse.

"There were many nights of thinking, 'What in the hell are we doing?'" Harler said. "I could see that some singers were thinking, 'This is nonsense.' But I think an artist always has to stay on the edge of creating something and going toward something new. If you get comfortable doing the things you have always done, that is the end of anything really artistic." ►



Alan Harler and the Mendelssohn Club in rehearsal at Philadelphia's historic Armory.



Jumatatu Poe of the Leah Stein Dance Company and Mendelssohn Club singers in David Lang's battle hymns. Photo © Jacques-Jean Tiziou/www.jjtiziou.net

“Let’s Perform in a Parking Garage!”

In recent years an array of arts groups have begun to venture out of their comfort zones. Lang himself flew the traditional coop years ago, joining with two colleagues in 1987 to create Bang on a Can, a festival that has grown into a year-round movement to bring contemporary music to new audiences. In the past 20 years, the festival has moved all over New York City from the more traditional venues such as Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall to art galleries, settlement houses, and financial centers.

As a choreographer, Leah Stein has made a career working in unusual spaces. She is not alone. At the Chorus America Conference this past June, just days before the *battle hymns* performance, choreographer Elizabeth Streb had tantalized attendees

with a video of her dance company practicing and performing in a former warehouse in Brooklyn. The “garage,” as she calls it, has become a magnet for people of all ages who perch themselves on the floor or wherever they can to be out of the way of the dancers and still view the process of creating art.

In fact, “Let’s perform in a parking garage!” has become a kind of rallying cry for innovation. The idea is to tear down the barriers that separate performers from their audiences, to go to where people are rather than demand that they come to you. Of all the art forms, choruses may have the easiest time venturing out—usually no instruments to lug, no special props or scenery to pack up. Yet choruses, especially the larger symphonic variety, often seem stuck in old ideas of where they must perform. “We [choruses] started off in churches,” said Tom Hall, music director of the Baltimore Choral Arts Society, “and then we translated that into

the concert hall. We gave works like the Brahms *Requiem* a concert profile that it never really had.

“The larger choruses have gotten themselves used to symphony halls,” he continued. “Yes, you can accomplish certain things in a symphony hall that you can’t accomplish in a bus station or the lobby of a library. But there are things that you cannot accomplish in the hall that you can accomplish in other places.”

So what got a symphonic chorus such as the Mendelssohn Club out of symphony hall and into an armory? For Harler, the drive to perform in off-the-beaten-track places starts with a genuine need. “If you’re doing *battle hymns*, then it makes sense that you are looking for a venue that has a military aspect to it,” he said. “If there’s dance, you need a venue where the audience is not in fixed seating, all in rows, because that is restrictive.” ►

What Comes First— the Venue or the Music?

Choruses tell a variety of stories about the “need” that propelled them into a new place. Some find a venue they love and build a program around it. Others start with a concept and find the music and the setting to support it. For others, like the Mendelssohn Club, a composition drives the search for a fitting venue.

In 2006, the Syracuse Children’s Chorus and the Syracuse University Women’s Choir participated in a performance where the venue was a significant portion of the campus of Syracuse University. Composer Robert Morris organized his *Sound/Path/Field* project around the cycle of notes emanating from the chimes in the bell tower at the School of Music. The debut performance included 11 musicians/ensembles, including four choruses, performing independently at various locations, and moving from one place to another over the duration of the piece.

“It was a work that was timed and we all had stopwatches,” Barbara Tagg, music director of both the Children’s Chorus and the Women’s Choir, recalled. “The children sang on the steps of the chapel, the steps of the National School of Citizenship. The women sang facing the quad. It was a very innovative and collaborative event, and all outdoors.”

A new commission also led the Springfield Choral Society to a venue in which they had never performed. For the

200th anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, Carol Barnett had composed a new setting of Walt Whitman’s famous poem, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” The chorus premiered the piece at their regular spring concerts on a program that included Zanannelli’s arrangement of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” Chet Alwes’ arrangement of the Illinois state song, and arrangements of six spirituals, most by Robert Shaw and Alice Parker.

It wasn’t much of a leap to take the program to the Lincoln Library—a museum that visitors enter through an enormous rotunda. “It was much larger than any room we had ever sung in,” music director Marion van der Loos recalled, “and people were going to be moving the whole time. We didn’t know what to expect with that. Would they ignore the fact that there were 65 people singing, would they stop and listen, or would they at least not interfere?”

As it turns out, there was no talking. Audience members were rapt. And the Choral Society had a new and expanding experience to tuck away for future reference. “The thing that struck me,” said van der Loos, “was the singers were so up for the performance that they really sang well. The man who arranged all the logistics for us came up and said, ‘You made people stop. They liked what they were hearing.’”

In Naples, Florida, in another museum-related program, singers with the multi-generational Choir Project performed outdoors alongside an authentic World War II-era railway boxcar. The Holocaust

Museum of Southwest Florida had acquired the boxcar from Europe, similar to the ones that transported Jewish prisoners to their death in concentration camps, and refurbished it as a mobile educational tool to support its mission of promoting tolerance and understanding by teaching the history and lessons of the Holocaust. At the dedication in 2008, the choir sang “Ani Ma’amin” arranged by Paul Caldwell and Sean Ivory—an affirmation of faith said at the close of Jewish morning prayers:

“I believe with complete faith that Messiah will come. Even though he may tarry, even with all that, I believe ... I will wait for him every day. I believe.”

“What moved us to the core,” Marian Dolan, artistic director of The Choir Project said, “were the many [Holocaust] survivors present, seated in front of the choir and behind me as I conducted, who hummed with us during the first verse and literally sang “Ani” with us on the repeat.”

The Place Inspires

Sometimes it is a particular space itself that gets music directors dreaming. This year Christopher Eanes assumed the directorship of the Cincinnati Boychoir, and in getting to know his new hometown, he ventured into the Taft Museum of Art. “It is a small place, a house, so it’s not sprawling,” Eanes said. “But in this foyer entryway were painted these murals by the artist Robert Duncanson, one of the first African American painters to get recognized in America who was working in the European tradition. I thought, ‘Wow, it would be interesting to pair music of African American composers of the same era, such as William Dawson or Henry Burleigh, with this art.’”

Eanes took the idea to the museum administrators and to the Boychoir board. Both thought it was a grand idea. The program, scheduled for March 2010, will be an informal concert, in which audience members are free to sit and listen to the boys sing, or to wander about the museum to see the artwork as they listen. Other art hanging in the museum is also providing grist for the mill. “There are some Rembrandts there, too, and we could we use the light and shadow in the Rembrandt and find a musical parallel for that,” says Eanes. “To hear music and look at art is a very natural pairing, almost like food and wine pairings.” ►



The Syracuse Children’s Chorus and the Syracuse University Woman’s Choir, directed by Barbara Tagg, participate in *Sound/Path/Field* project.



Sean Ivory and boxcar used by *The Choir Project*.

Drawing these parallels between art forms makes all kinds of sense artistically, but also in attracting and educating new audiences. “The concert-going audience these days needs more stimuli,” Eanes said, “so rather than fight that, why don’t we embrace it and give them more? And from a practical point of view, we are always trying to reach new audiences. Why not try to reach out to the art museum-going audiences?”

A Marriage of Context

While a number of choruses take occasional forays into new venues, at least one group has made “context” its organizing principle. Under artistic director Susan Swaney, the Bloomington, Indiana-based chamber group *Voces Novae* consistently positions themselves in unexpected or stimulating contexts. Past programs have taken place in both traditional and non-traditional performance venues such as The Irish Lion pub and Tutto Bene wine bar, Hilltop Gardens, an abandoned stone mill, an historic opera house, and the Habitat for Humanity ReStore warehouse.

For this group, context is far more than the places they sing. “We try to use context to make us listen to the music differently,” Swaney said, “and context then to use the music to look at our lives differently.” The goal for every concert is for audience members to leave with a new, deeper perspective on some aspect of their everyday experience—to connect the dots between their artistic experiences and their workaday world.

Voces Novae’s concerts often start with the scantest of ideas or themes, requiring months, sometimes years, of percolating. The program *Recycling and Transformation*, presented on Mother’s Day 2008, came together as Swaney reflected on the life of her mother-in-law—Nancy Sewell Woollen. “If she found five wild berries by the roadside, they would be transformed into one delicious turnover for the lucky person who showed up as she pulled it out of the oven,” Swaney later wrote in the program notes. “They were essentially acts of recycling, unrecognizable because she was simply the catalyst by which something ordinary was transformed into something useful or beautiful.”

With this theme in mind, the choir began looking around for a place to reinforce the recycling idea. Habitat for

Humanity’s ReStore warehouse fit the bill. “We stacked up building supplies to create a stage,” Swaney recalled, “and borrowed a backdrop that had been used for the world music festival that was made from recycled rags. We created an instrument out of hanging bottles that the percussionist improvised on.”

The music on the program played on the recycling theme in clever ways—Durufle’s “Ubi Caritas,” which incorporates an ancient plainchant, Ockeghem’s “Kyrie” from *Missa L’homme armé*, which borrows from a famous French folk tune (“The Armed Man”), and “The Cries of London,” in which Orlando Gibbons weaves the cries of peddlers and town criers into a plainchant. “Who Will Buy?” from the musical *Oliver!* further recycles the idea.

The next idea that may require some percolating time is a dinner concert at a nearby dairy farm. Already Shaney is imagining music with a food theme. “There are lots of drinking songs, of course,” she says, “but there’s also a Renaissance piece about ladies who make cheese, a German piece about eggs, a Bulgarian piece about peppers. And then there is a piece about mushrooms, based on a Sylvia Plath poem.”

The possibilities, it would seem, are endless and has set *Voces Novae* apart in a town already rich culturally and musically. “We really try to come at our concerts a different way,” said Shaney. “We bring the music out to the community. We have a core fan base that comes along with us just because they know they are going to have an experience.” ▶



Members of *Voces Novae* at their *Recycling and Transformation* concert.

Logistics, Logistics, Logistics

Off-the-beaten-track venues present challenges, of course. Warehouses work well for housing wares, but where does a chorus stand? Where does your audience sit—or do they? At its Recycling and Transformation concert, Voces Novae pulled out every chair that was for sale at ReStore and set them up. When those ran out, singers gave their own chairs to audience members coming in.

In taking her chorus to the Lincoln Library, van der Loos had to experiment with how to arrange the singers around the rim of the rotunda so as not to block fire exits or the museum visitors walking through. Eanes and the administrators at the Taft Museum are having to think carefully about how 30 boy choristers can coexist happily with priceless artwork. The *battle hymns* project required audience members to pick up their chairs and move them several times during the performance to accommodate changes in scene. Outdoor venues always need a back-up plan in case of inclement weather.

And let's face it. Armories, stone mills, and warehouses were not created with good acoustics. In the stone mill where Voces Novae performed a program about the historical figure Eugene B. Debs, the acoustics were so rinky that it was difficult for the singers, instrumentalists, and actors to hear each other. "Sometimes you get stuck with bad acoustics when you go for these interesting concert venues," Swaney said with a laugh. "I think that's why we got interested in the idea of starting with acoustics and building programs around that."

If nothing else, less than ideal venues teach choral directors and singers many lessons about flexibility. "We all have our ideas about what the perfect concert performance situation is," Eanes said. "We always try to find those, but I think you open yourself up to some real opportunities if you are simply willing to perform—inside, outside, anywhere."

Our Fearless Leader

The choruses that choose to eschew creature comforts are pioneers, in a way, and they need a fearless leader—usually the music director—to say at appropriate intervals, "Really, folks, it's going to be okay."

As the *battle hymns* project unfolded, Kochavi and other singers took comfort

in the periodic pep talks from Stein and Harler. "It was very important for Alan and Leah to say to the singers, 'We are not just rehearsing. We are part of creating the piece. Don't worry if things seem chaotic. Don't worry if something you learned last week is something we are throwing out this week. It is all part of the process.' Eventually, everyone came to understand—this is a whole different can of worms," said Kochavi.

Van der Loos is very aware that any deviation from the norm can throw her singers, and she works to both encourage them and increase their flexibility. "People join community choruses for various reasons," she said. "For a sense of society, because they are lonely, and because they can be with other people and create a small group of friends. They may come in really frightened and some of them have to be encouraged week by week that they are okay."

But she also pushes a little. "I change where people sit at rehearsals," she said. "I had them sing in quartets recently and many were terrified. 'I can't sing unless I'm next to my friend.' Then they found out that having all the parts surrounding them made it easier."

When a drive for innovation and a sense of adventure becomes part of the fabric of your organization, singers come to expect it. Swaney says Voces Novae singers come into the group knowing what it's all about. "We don't have a performance home," she said, "so the singers have to adapt very quickly to different situations."

Kochavi said he decided to sing with the Mendelssohn Club precisely because he wanted to branch out and try new things—up to a point. "I knew I would get these kinds of experiences," he said, "and at the same time, have the more traditional experience of singing the Verdi *Requiem* in the big concert hall. It's the best of both worlds."

It's Worth the Risk

Venturing into new venues takes courage, but the returns are many—new audiences, more exciting programs, more confident singers. And taking risks has a way of stirring up the creative juices. As Eanes was planning the concert in the Taft Museum, he began thinking about all the beautiful

Lessons Learned

- Scout it out
- Do lots of dry runs
- Be flexible
- Have contingency plans
- Anticipate singers' concerns

architectural spaces in downtown Cincinnati. Now he's thinking about doing some "drive-by" singing. "On an afternoon in December, maybe we'll put the boys on a bus and go sing Christmas music in five or six of these spaces," he said. "Even if it doesn't drum up business for our Christmas concerts, it brings

a little happiness to people's day. And that's what we're there for."

Standing in his high perch conducting *battle hymns*, Harler was already concocting ideas for another out-of-the-box performance. "There were moments during the piece when a big section of the audience had to stand and move their chairs to a different place," he said. "Standing above that and seeing that happen, I had an idea of my next insanity. I would really like to commission a piece in which not only the chorus and the dancers move, but the audience moves also."

Swaney and Voces Novae had a similar inspiration recently as they warmed up for a memorial service at a hospice. They were in the parking garage and marveling at the great acoustics. "Now we're thinking of doing a program there, maybe singing just for an afternoon, as people go in and out of that stressful situation."

Voces Novae may be the first chorus where "Let's perform in a parking garage" is not a metaphor. ■

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